



AFFIRMATION:

UNITED METHODISTS FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CONCERNS.....

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REACTIONS TO GENERAL CONFERENCE

Many reactions have been heard to the General Conference actions, among them expressions of despair and a desire to leave the church. Others, however, have responded with a willful determination to "stay put" in spite of the church's inhospitality. Following are two articles which touch on these diverse reactions.

First is an article written by a lesbian with 20 years service in the representative ministry of the United Methodist Church. Prompted by the regressive climate in the church in recent years to reassess her calling, she has chosen to remain within the system. "Discerning the Real Church" is her statement of that calling.

The second article was contributed by a gay man, long active in the United Methodist Church. In the midst of his anger and frustration, he finds himself with the gift of a vision. He shares that vision with us in "Affirmation as Who-ville." -Ed.

DISCERNING THE REAL CHURCH

As a woman (and lesbian) of faith I experience a strong call to discernment as part of my call to ministry. Always a part of my life, this call is especially significant at this point in the history of the United Methodist Church.

We need the clarity and courage to distinguish the difference between Gospel and church to know that they are not synonymous. The church is a fallible community of faith; it is accountable to God and to the Gospel. Contrary to the implications, procedures and focus of the recent General Conference, the church's primary purpose is servanthood in the world. This purpose is the church's sole mandate. It has no mandate to be God's surrogate judge/mediator in the world (though the church has often claimed to have such a role!). The church distorts its mandate when it sees itself as a surrogate for the One who is the only judge. When it does so, it renounces its own accountability and loses its authenticity.

This loss is evident in the years of preparation and resulting actions of this year's General Conference. Emerging is a "pseudo church" devoted to the survival and worship of its own institutional form. This "pseudo church" substitutes its least consequential qualities (Administrative Boards, Annual Conferences, General Conferences) for its primary witness. Careful discernment dis-

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AFFIRMATION AS WHO-VILLE

A few nights ago, as we in Mid-Atlantic Affirmation were concluding our first post-General Conference meeting by standing arm-in-arm singing "Song of the Soul," I had a vision--a delightfully wacky, healing vision. All of a sudden, I felt I was in Who-ville on Christmas morning.

You know the scene: The Grinch, who can't stand the Whos' gaiety, has just stolen Christmas (or so he thinks) by taking every Who tree, stocking, gift, etc. He's about to dump all the confiscated goodies over "the side of Mount Crumpit," when he hears across the countryside not the wailing he had wanted but, rather, joyous singing. The Grinch had failed; the Whos still had their Christmas.

I realized, as I was singing, that the United Methodist Church is my Grinch. It thought that, by casting bigoted votes at General Conference, it could deny me the Christian love and assurance I have known all my life. And, for a while, in my anger I was giving the church the wailing it (like the Grinch) wanted.

But, my vision reminded me, Christian faith and love is more than just the institutional church. Indeed, the institution need not exist at all for that faith and love to be present, just as trees, gifts, and "Who-pudding" need not be present for there to be Christmas.

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STATEMENTS OF SOLIDARITY

The actions of the General Conference are instigating a steady flow of expressions of solidarity with lesbians and gay men in the church.

Persons at Iliff School of Theology characterized the legislation as a violation of "the best which is within the United Methodist tradition." They said it repeats "grievous errors from its past," such as condoning slave holding in 1840, excluding female delegates (1888) and formation of the all-black Central Jurisdiction in 1939 as the price for union of the former Methodist Protestant, Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Episcopal Church South. The signers pledged themselves not to "ask or answer any questions" about their own or others' sexual orientation "in settings related to candidacy, ordination, or appointment.

Martin Niemoller's famous statement about failing to speak up was the basis for those in the Western New York Annual Conference who wore a purple ribbon as a sign of "sadness

for and protest" about the "discriminatory and unjust action" of General Conference.

Members of the California-Nevada Annual Conference were to consider a powerful statement of solidarity, and persons attending the Pacific and Southwest Annual Conference wore a black ribbon behind their Affirmation buttons.

And we're getting letters...

...from a new District Superintendent, who said, "Keep up the good work - in my new position I hope to have a positive effect for our cause."

...from a South Carolinian who sent word of "the love and good will of many of us who sense kinship with you and wish for all of us a richer and more Christian perspective."

...from a New England parent of a lesbian who appreciated The Open Hand (our General Conference newsletter) because, "it helped to know that I am not alone in the pain that society inflicts."

...from an Indiana pastor, saying "Thank you for your courage and your work," and enclosing a generous gift.

THE AFFIRMATION PRESENCE

"We are a gay and lesbian people
And we are singing, singing for our lives."
--Holly Near

The words to this Holly Near song reflect the survival and the victory of the Affirmation presence at General Conference. A sign in the Affirmation office read, "We are a justice-seeking, reconciling people." This image of ourselves sustained us through the conference, challenging us and reminding us of who we were.

During the course of the General Conference, one could see Affirmation members and friends passing out the daily newsletter, The Open Hand ("If your heart is as my heart, then give me your hand."). The newsletter, well-received, included sections from the platform statement, an article by the parents of a gay man, a statement from a gay clergyperson, an article by a District Superintendent. The content reflected the reconciling presence in which Affirmation participated.

Affirmation folk sustained ourselves and our supporters (and nonsupporters) by singing daily at the Civic Center as the conference broke for lunch. The sounds filled the front hall--"Walls that divide are broken down...", "Why don't you sing this song, why don't you sing along, and we can sing for a long, long, time," "Can we be like drops of water falling on the stone...." These tunes bound up our wounds, made us strong, and reflected our wholeness. We sang for our lives and for the lives of our sisters and brothers who were not present.

At other moments during the ten days, Affirmation folk in white-face spoke to delegates and visitors through mime. "The Parable of the Church" showed the church walling out gay men and lesbians, the poor, the Good News people, and people of color. Then, walled within its confining space, the church cried out for help. Together, the church and the marginalized removed the wall and embraced. A "coming out" mime showed the struggles of gay men and lesbians coming out, being shy, being rejected, busting out, being beaten, coming out whole. "Whose Calling" --a mime of ordination, depicted the calling from God of a gay man or lesbian. When the orders are stripped away by the church, God's calling remains.

Silent powerful witnesses were spoken by Affirmation's actions. We sang for our lives, we loved others for our lives, we attempted to live as the church in a justice-seeking and reconciling presence. We found hope and empowerment from that presence. We are alive!

-A lesbian member of the Coordinating Committee whose name cannot be used.

FALL IN DENVER

Affirmation folk in Denver are already making their plans to host our gathering in their city September 14-16. Considering that they are also involved in hosting the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays meeting that same month, we appreciate their efforts on our behalf. The best way to show our appreciation is by being sure they have plenty to do--let's have a good turn out.

A major emphasis of the meeting will be conversations and experiences toward a gay and lesbian theology. We will also do further development of exciting new program ideas--all of them are areas needing involvement of more people.

As is our custom, the meeting will begin with worship and fellowship on Friday evening and continue through noon Sunday. The meeting will be held at a downtown Denver church, with housing provided with lesbians and gay men living in the neighborhood.

More details and a registration form will be in the August newsletter. The meeting has a sliding-scale registration fee--\$5.00 for persons with an annual income of \$5,000 or less, \$1.00 per thousand dollars for persons with an annual income above \$5,000. Participants in the meeting are also expected to participate in a travel pool so that travel costs are equalized. A "share" in the travel pool generally runs \$100-150. Those who spend less to travel to the meeting pay the difference into the pool. Those who spend more get the difference back. Because some people contribute their refund back to the travel pool and it is subsidized from Affirmation's regular budget, people who need to pay less than a full share can do so. Our effort is to minimize cost as a barrier to participation.

Make your plans now--and be watching for the registration form in the next newsletter!

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closes that structures provide the weakest witness, and are only incidental to the Gospel and God's purpose for the church.

Careful and prayerful discernment also enables the identification of the church's missional arenas: persons and local congregations risking faithful focus on community and global ministry; local, district and annual conference councils on ministries; advisory/planning boards and groups for outreach mission at all levels. Points of the church's strongest witness, these contexts are integral to the implementation of the Gospel mandate for the church.

The contrast between the institutional "pseudo church" and the real community of faith risking mission in the world is great. The "pseudo church" is exposed along with many of its leaders who are false prophets claiming to be God's surrogate judges and mediators. The real church, fallible and imperfect, stands clear in its role as witness and servant in the world.

Sharing the same call to discernment, our calls to subsequent action may nevertheless be quite diverse. Some may be called to complete separation from both parts of the church. My particular call is to remain visibly connected to the Gospel in the world, a part of God's church in its human form. This calling includes continuously articulating the distinction between Gospel and

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Ever since General Conference had cast its anti-ordination vote, I had been angrily saying that I no longer considered myself part of the United Methodist Church. Suddenly, I saw I had been saying that for the wrong reason. It wasn't that I was rejecting the church; it was that the church was trying to steal something from me--something it couldn't take unless I let it--my own commitment and faith.

I still feel separated from the United Methodist institution, and I still plan to leave my local congregation if it doesn't have the courage and integrity to become a Reconciling Congregation within the next few months. I continue to think that Luke 10:8-12--with its mandate to exit the unwelcoming town and shake the dust from one's shoes--is appropriate for gay/lesbian United Methodists to consider. But I now know that it never was right to give the institutional church the exalted position I gave it for many years.

Salvation came to the Grinch that Christmas morning, when his heart "grew three sizes" and he realized the error of his ways. If the United Methodist Church someday chooses to feel its "heart strangely warmed" (to quote John Wesley), it will be welcome back in my circle, as the Whos welcomed the Grinch. Then, it can join me as I continue to sing. -Brad R.

QUOTES FROM GENERAL CONFERENCE

Comments from Affirmation members

1) on the legislation

"I feel like a good friend has died. The death was expected, but still there is pain and there must be grieving at the loss."

"Our presence and visibility becomes even more important now that the United Methodist Church has taken a definite stand. We are modern-day prophets. We are in ministry to the church and its people. Even more important may be our ministry to the gay men and lesbians who will leave or have already left a church which has rejected them. We are witnesses of hope as the community of faith."

2) on our own life as a group

"You are all my family. When I got on the bus to go to Greensboro, I looked out the window and it was like my mom standing there waving. You stood in a row hugging each other and watched the bus drive off until you couldn't see it any more. I felt such support."

"After I leave, I am not alone. I am connected with all of you. Whenever I light a candle or sing a song, I am with you. We are connected more now than we have ever been before."

"I hate goodbyes. But with this group I do not have to say goodbye. We are still together after we leave and will for sure see each other again. I love you."

"I was about to give up on the United Methodist Church, but now I plan to stay with it, despite this legislation, because in this group I have found the church as it is meant to be. It gives me hope to see the way we all care for each other here. I can really feel the Spirit among us."

AFFIRMATION GETS PUBLISHED

Affirmation's response to the General Conference will be published in upcoming issues of two official denominational publications, Circuit Rider and engage/social action. Circuit Rider is published in Nashville as a communication medium for United Methodist clergy. e/sa is jointly published by the General Board of Church and Society with another denomination.

Both articles carry the by-line of Morris Floyd, an Affirmation spokesperson. Their content is consistent with that of a press statement developed collegially among persons present during the last few days of General Conference.

3) on living in exile

"We are an exilic people. I feel very strongly the kind of paradox of the Hebrew people in exile. Their Temple was destroyed, their faith in God demolished. And they were captives in a foreign land. Into this mood of despair, 2nd Isaiah comes as prophet. He says that there is something new coming, something that they have never known before on the earth. He ends the book with chapter 55--You shall go forth and the mountains will sing and the trees will clap their hands. All this shall be a sign of this everlasting covenant."

"I feel this paradox within this General Conference experience. We are exiles, yet we are victors and receivers of the promise that something new is coming."

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church, the real church and the "pseudo church." As one lesbian in ministry, if I separated from the church based on the "pseudo church's" sinful actions, I would be supporting the "pseudo church" in its pretense that it is the real church. It would be giving credence to false prophets rather than protesting their attempts to usurp God's role.

Retaining my power and responsibility as a part of the church means disavowing the attempt of the "pseudo church" to block my call or take that responsibility from me. By continuing to act on my vocation to ministry, I am a part of the real church, giving to and through it what God has created me to be in her world with her people.

GENERAL CONFERENCE SOUVENIRS

No... we're not selling fake bronze medallions, bells or books. But we do have a few sets of the newsletter The Open Hand which Affirmation distributed during General Conference. It gives a nice flavor of our presence there.

Those who act fast--the first thirty or so--will get originals, on the pink and lavender paper. They have even been to the Baltimore Civic Center!

A contribution of \$5.00 or more, sent to Mark Bowman at [redacted] Washington DC [redacted] will speed these goodies your way. Your contribution will help support our organizing work in the next few months.

CAMPMEETING '85

A time for fun, renewal and growthful fellowship for members of the Affirmation family is forecast for the Summer of 1985. But your input is needed to make it go.

The basic idea is to gather at a campground or similar facility for part or all of the week of June 30 through July 7, 1985. Some structure could be preplanned to facilitate our integration of new family members and sharing of our many different skills, interests and commitments.

If you would be interested in such an event, please respond to the following questions and return by July 15 to: Brad R., [REDACTED] Washington, DC [REDACTED].

1. Are you interested in attending the Campmeeting? ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Would you prefer: ☐ a whole week? ☐ a long weekend?
3. Could you come during the week including July 4 in 1985? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Do you have children who would accompany you? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Would you object to the presence of children? ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Would be willing to help with child care? ☐ Yes ☐ No
7. What is your preference as to "rusticity?"
☐ Very rustic: tents or sleeping bags under the stars
☐ Semi-rustic: remember church camp bunk beds?
☐ Not-so-rustic: a real bed, please!
8. What could you afford to spend for room and board? \$
9. What geographic qualities appeal to you? (Check all that apply.)
☐ the beach ☐ mountains ☐ desert
☐ east coast ☐ central U.S. ☐ west coast
10. Do you have any specific facilities to suggest? Please supply complete contact information: _____

11. Would you be on the planning committee? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 Name Phone
 Address

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